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Multiple approaches to heritage in urban regeneration: the case of City Gate, Valletta

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}

Using heritage resources within local urban regeneration is rarely a simple matter of preserving some structures or relating some historical events and presuming that this will make some contribution to the contemporary objectives of regeneration. Buildings, spaces and historic narratives are not in themselves heritage but they can become it. This paper examines a single case seeking answers to the question, ‘how does heritage happen?’ and specifically explores the variety of ways in which built environmental forms in particular can be treated in order to use heritage to achieve contemporary regeneration objectives.

The problem and the plan

The city of Valletta, Malta, owes its UNESCO World Heritage status (awarded in 1980) to being a complete, intact, late renaissance, planned walled city begun in 1566 by the ruling Knights of St John after the lifting of the dramatic Ottoman siege of 1565. The main blemish on this perfection was caused by an air raid during the second siege, that of the British crown colony and naval base in 1942 that destroyed the main gated entrance to the city, adjoining the Opera House and its surroundings. Having remained an untidy, partly ruined and temporally used area (dominantly as a car park) since the end of World War II, the redevelopment of the main City Gate, its immediate environs and the ruins of the Opera House is now almost complete to a plan led by Renzo Piano. The 70-year delay underlines the importance attached to the site in two respects. Functionally, it is the spatial interface between the compact historic city, which houses many of the important national government functions, much of the cultural infrastructure and a resident population of approximately 6600 and the wider urban agglomeration of some 368,000 people that stretches around Grand Harbour and along the north coast of the island. Second, the site, although compact, has an enormous symbolic importance emphasized by its location, as an expression of Maltese identity at this time in its evolution.
Although there was always agreement that something needed to be done, there was equally always sharp disagreement between the agencies involved within and beyond Malta, most notably among the Maltese people themselves as to what this should be (see the many blogs), stalling all previous initiatives, such as the Hubbard plan (Harrison and Hubbard 1945), the first Piano plan (1986), and the England plan (1999), which incorporated some of Piano’s earlier ideas.

Valletta has many unique elements but the basic issues facing the inner city are familiar. The suburbanization of employment, commerce and above all residents had led to a sharp decline in the inner-city population and considerable physical dilapidation (Smith and Ebejer 2012). Simultaneously, tourism uses were increasing, leading to concentrated daytime tourism activity together with an absence of night-time activity once the tourists returned to their coastal resorts. The peninsular site has the added complication of both restricted space within the walls and of being surrounded on three sides by water, focusing communication with the rest of the urban area on the neck of the peninsular around the City Gate.

The City Gate project is the last important part and arguably the climax of a much wider series of urban regeneration projects over the last decade. These include the redesign of St George’s Square in front of the Grand Master’s palace, the largest public space within the walled city, previously used as a car park; the repaving and pedestrianization of Merchants Street in 2008; the redesign of the Upper Barrakka gardens and the installation of a lift to the old Customs House on the waterfront in 2012, where a new public ferry service over Grand Harbour to the Three Cities on the historically naval Dockyard Creek has been initiated; and the recent renovation of Fort St Elmo at the end of the peninsula. Prior creation of a new cruise terminal in the historic Pinto Stores on Grand Harbour was a key to the viability of these projects. More widely outside Valletta, the renovation and redevelopment, largely for tourism, of the waterfront of Dockyard Creek across Grand Harbour has been long in progress (Tunbridge and Ashworth 2003; Tunbridge 2008) and is currently approaching completion (Tunbridge 2014).

The approaches to the past

The interest of this paper in the plan is not just its significance to Valletta and Malta as a whole, but is that it treats the existing built environmental forms in at least eight different ways. The most usual reactions to a site of such historic and symbolic importance would be either a careful preservation of what remains of the original structures and spaces or a painstaking reconstruction, in the spirit of Viollet-le-Duc, of what had been or even what ought to have been. Instead, different aspects of the site have been treated in a range of quite different and even seemingly contradictory ways, yet with the intention of shaping an overriding coherence of the whole ensemble. These approaches include:

1. The careful preservation of the remaining walls, ditches, cavaliers (i.e. artillery platforms), enhanced by the removal of some incongruous elements acquired over the centuries.
2. The preservation of the Opera House ruins as they were left in 1942 and construction within them of a new open-air performance area.
3. The replacement of the staircases leading to the walls, but in a grander style than previously.
4. The ‘symbolic reconstruction’ of the bridge and gate, with the bridge being narrowed to enhance the sense of entry, and the gate which has neither been replaced by one
of its four previous structures nor has a new gate been created. Instead, a gateless
symbolic entry to the city has been provided.
(5) The demolition of some peripheral buildings now deemed to be ‘incongruous’.
(6) The creation of a remodelled public space, ‘Freedom Square’, in front of and to an
extent even underneath the new Parliament building.
(7) The planting of a new landscaped garden in the ditches adjacent to the gate, acces-
sible to the public via a lift. This is using the historic element for a quite different
purpose than originally intended. It remains uncertain if, or when, this part of the
plan will be implemented, as the government scrapped it as an economy measure,
while Piano insists it remains and questions what would otherwise be done with
the space.
(8) The new construction of a large conspicuous contemporary style parliament building
(albeit with a height and bulk broadly compatible with the historic skyline from an
inland approach).

Thus the preservation of structures and their ruins, the replacement of missing elements,
symbolic reconstruction, demolition, the creation of a remodelled public space, the reuse of
historic structures and the insertion of an uncompromisingly contemporary new building,
are all evident in close juxtaposition.

The importance of the area and the issues raised by its redevelopment, not least the variety
of approaches, largely account for the sharp controversies and consequent long delay. In
addition, in a small country issues that elsewhere concern local planning authorities become
easily embroiled in national sensitivities, national political fissures and even international
relations reflecting the interests of UNESCO. During Prime Minister Gonzi’s second legislature
starting in 2008, he decided to complete this high-profile project, comprising the City Gate,
Opera House, new Parliament building and new public space, regardless of opposition, with
minimal public consultation or parliamentary debate (and significantly without formally
informing UNESCO and its agency ICOMOS).

The most obvious and visible issue is the choice between the preservation of past struc-
tures and morphologies and the creation of new buildings, shapes and spaces, whether in
contemporary or historic styles. The possibility of replacing a former gate raises the issue of
which of the four gates that have historically occupied this space should be reconstructed.
The most recent was built in 1964 in an Italian modernist style, which was a replacement
for the 1853 gate destroyed in the air raid, itself a replacement for the 1632 and 1566 gates,
and was accompanied by the creation of new buildings, shapes and spaces. Related to the
dilemma of old or new forms is the question of uses and users. The area is the direct interface
between the conserved historic city and the wider residents’ city-region, with its everyday
urban functions, most notably the adjacent main bus station. Is this main entry to the city
reflecting the needs of heritage tourists to this compact World Heritage city or residents,
whether the small number (c. 6600) who still live in the historic city or the wider Maltese
population? This design and the heritage articulated through it, reflects and expresses the
ambiguities and even contradictions of how people view themselves and wish to be viewed
by others. Thus heritage is not a single simple approach to built environmental design here
or elsewhere. It applies multiple techniques to achieve multiple goals for multiple purposes
and users.
Regeneration for whom?

The obvious question is whose needs are being served and whose objectives are being manifested by the plan? The site is a major World Heritage location of pan-European and global significance, a major tourist circulation area and tourism attraction in itself; it is serving the needs of local residents and other Maltese; it is a new governmental centre with national capital functions and, more broadly, it represents and projects contemporary Maltese identity. It is the attempt to be all of these that creates many of the contradictions, dilemmas and conflicts. In particular, there is a mix of universal cultural values and global and national place identities, together with pragmatic mundane functions for tourists and residents alike.

A World Heritage for all humanity

Although the importance of the World Heritage function is clearly dominant, physically and legally, there are still ambivalences. “There seems to be a schism between those who worry about Valletta’s museumification (and who want the city to be revived) and those who oppose the introduction of elements common in other capital cities (and who want the city to be preserved)” (Smith and Ebejer 2012, 149). Curiously, in its description of the area to visitors, the tourist office appears to deny the historicity altogether. “The City Gate project is redefining our approach to the city creating a contemporary grand entrance that does not seek to evoke the past” (VisitMalta.com). This is clearly absurd as many elements of the plan are strong evocations of different pasts as experienced in the present, but it does demonstrate the continuing uncertainty about whether the development is a confirmation and reassertion of past identities or a clear break with the past or both of these, however contradictory this may appear to be. There is certainly an unresolved tension between the city’s responsibilities as custodian of a global heritage and the functional needs of citizens and tourists for circulation, accessibility and happening space.

The boundary of the World Heritage site runs along the outside face of the walls. Most of the development is thus clearly inside the designated site. Concern has also been expressed about the absence of a buffer zone around the site. Inevitably therefore there have been sharp and continuing controversies, especially with UNESCO/ICOMOS (Vassallo 2009; Cooke 2013). The failure to inform UNESCO, and subsequent investigation by ICOMOS, has led to rumours of a possible threat of delisting. This is a tension experienced in many cities with World Heritage status, although it has resulted in de-listing on only one occasion (namely Dresden Elbe valley in 2009). Although not without precedent, this would be politically difficult and thus unlikely, but pressures and uncertainties remain.

Whatever the opinion on the merits of the scheme and its diverse elements, and both local and professional architectural opinions are sharply divided (Briguglio 2010; Squires 2010; Zammit 2010; Parnell 2014), there is a strong consensus that almost anything would be better than the chaotic situation that has existed as a blight on the city for almost 70 years.

Tourists

The three inhabited islands of the Malta archipelago (Malta, Gozo and Comino) are heavily dependent upon a tourism based economy. In 2012 it attracted 1.4 million tourists for 11.7 million nights, largely from the UK, with an average length of stay of eight days (Ministry
of Culture, Tourism and the Environment 2012). However, it is a Mediterranean sun and sea based industry centred upon the coastal resorts, principally on the north coast stretching westward from Valletta. Cultural and heritage attractions serve a holiday excursion market and the non-resort cities play only a muted role, providing museums, heritage sites, tourist shopping and largely daytime food and drink services. The impacts of the City Gate development upon the existing tourism activities and upon future aspirations is limited, and the project alone is unlikely in itself to have a major impact on tourism. The gate area is heavily used by tourists during the day as the main entrance to and exit from the city, providing access along Merchants and Republic Streets, which are dominated by tourist-oriented shopping and catering. Valletta has few hotels within the walls and two just immediately beyond the walls, thus unsurprisingly, given the location of both tourists and most residents, there is little night-time activity in the city (the main youth oriented night-life district is located at Paceville, on St George’s Bay, not in Valletta).

The government and its agency, the Malta Tourism Authority, have occasionally expressed the desirability of broadening the tourism base (Ministry of Culture 2007, 2012), moving up-market away from a beach resort holiday industry towards an industry based upon heritage and culture more generally (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2003). The gate development would help to “reorientate Malta’s image away from external perceptions of cheap resort tourism” (Smith and Ebejer 2012, 148). If successful, such radical reorientations would change the role of Valletta and thus of the gate area and to a lesser extent the other cities, especially Mdina. However, the reality of such a ‘blue-grey transition’ (Ashworth and Tunbridge 2004, 2005; Ashworth 2008) is currently very ambivalent. Despite ministerial pronouncements there is limited evidence of a radical restructuring of tourism markets, facilities, investment and brand image, all of which have remained fairly consistent over the last decade. As elsewhere, the package holiday market has been eroded by independent internet booking, budget air access over the past decade and the burgeoning cruise market, which is served by the new cruise terminal with the lift to Valletta and ferry across the harbour. However, the consequences of these market trends and infrastructure developments are not yet reflected in an unambiguous shift from a blue to a grey tourism. The urban heritage, concentrated in the historic city of Valletta, remains largely an add-on to a beach resort holiday.

Residents

The Valletta City Gate project aims to transform the main entrance to Malta’s capital by creating a coherent scheme for an area that has suffered from controversial and confused urban development. The undisputed historic and architectural heritage of the site will be preserved and restored, while the creation of new cultural and civic venues will create a more vibrant urbanity … The rehabilitation and the rationalisation of adjoining public spaces will expand and improve pedestrian circulation into and within Valletta. (Renzo Piano workshop at www.rpbw.com/project/86/valletta-city-gate)

Are the residents of the city the principle intended beneficiaries of what is in essence an urban regeneration project tackling issues familiar elsewhere? Although the residents of Valletta will experience a more attractive and inviting entry to the inner city than the muddled and unattractive ‘controversial and confused urban development’ area they have hitherto experienced, it is difficult to envisage how the development will ‘create a more vibrant urbanity’, especially for the existing residents of the walled city whose shops and services
are increasingly serving tourists not locals. The existing inner-city population is small and as yet shows few signs of gentrification. Apart from tourists during the day, the new arts performance area in the Opera House and ‘Freedom Square’ may attract more people, especially in the evening, and also possibly new enterprises on adjoining sites. However, Parliament is already located in the inner city, creating a problem of car access and parking around St George’s Square, an issue that presumably will now be relocated to the City Gate area.

The residents of the wider urban agglomeration may well find access to the inner city more difficult. The previous car parking areas have been, or will be, removed and the plan proposes moving the existing main city bus terminal and associated cluster of small kiosks and stalls serving travellers from the Triton Fountain circle immediately outside the City Gate to the neighbouring St James Ditch. Certainly the existing bus terminal is untidy and aesthetically unsuited to its historic surroundings but it is conveniently located and its future remains unclear.

**Government**

The existing structure plan for the inner city had proposed constructing a new government administration centre outside Valletta to house most government departments, while the inner city would continue to house many of the representative and symbolic functions, including Parliament and many ministries, using the existing palaces and auberges (the lodgings of the Knights) of Valletta. With the existence of many large historic buildings that need appropriate functions, the idea of constructing a new building for Parliament, currently lodged in the Grand Master’s Palace, seems perverse, but explicable by a nation building necessity that a new modern building, rather than the reuse of a building from the time of the Knights or the British symbolizes a clear break with the colonial past.

However, the question, ‘why keep the capital functions in Valletta?’ does not seem to have been seriously discussed. Valletta is only the capital because first the Knights built it as such and then the British made it their seat of government, probably because of the maritime orientation of both regimes, replacing the more central, and more distinctively Maltese, Mdina and its contiguous modern suburb, Rabat. Compact, cramped and difficult to access from the rest of the city region, it could be argued that the historic city has too many functions in a small space and it would be preferable to manage it as a ‘heritage gem city’ (Ashworth and Tunbridge 1990) for its international historic and cultural values and largely daytime use by visitors, with preservation taking precedence over contemporary functionality, while returning the capital functions to the more accessible and less pressurized Mdina.

**Maltese identity**

The development also raises fundamental and sensitive heritage issues about the evolving identity of the Maltese people (Ebejer 2009; Smith 2009, 2010). The heritage structures, relics and historic events of Malta, and especially the elements marketed to tourists, are essentially colonial, created by 268 years of occupation by the Knights of St John and subsequently 161 years as a British colony and naval base. Malta has played a decisive role in European history, but in a history determined by others however much it impacted upon the Maltese. Consequently, it has “a very fuzzy cultural identity” (Smith and Ebejer 2012, 148), even “a post-colonial inferiority complex” (Smith and Ebejer 2012, 148) resulting in a
'nationless state' (Baldacchino 2009). This raises the central omnipresent question. Is Malta the custodian of an internationally significant World Heritage, albeit created by others, serving a global market; a relict outpost of a defunct British Empire, clinging to the customs, habits and language of its erstwhile colonizers; an Italian island (by historic accident used for a time as a British military base); a distinctive ethnic, national and political entity within the EU; or simultaneously all of these? The development expresses many of these conflicting identities. As noted earlier, in a small country the local and the national merge easily as planning issues become political issues of national and even international significance. The tensions between UNESCO’s World Heritage committee and local political representation have not been resolved. The juxtaposition of the fortifications of the Knights’ and the Parliament building of the now independent republic contrasts both form and function. Is the new square to be a tourism precinct, political expression space or theatre anti-room? It was the 1940–1943 siege of the British base that created the space, destroyed the Kingsway / Strada reale gate and left the now preserved ruins of the Opera House (itself a British late Victorian building but housing an Italian art form). Some of the opposition to the plan is openly in opposition to its instigator, Piano, simply because he is Italian and thus cannot understand the complexities of being Maltese, although his associate, England, is, however ironically, Maltese (Smith and Ebejer 2012, 146).

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the City Gate project must be concerned with the functional details of urban life and is a long overdue attempt to approach the issues of a multifunctional inner city. However, given the additional factor of the significance of the heritage site, nationally and globally together with the tourism this generates, it inevitably goes far beyond the functional details of urban planning and the regeneration of historic inner cities. This design, its plethora of conflicting approaches to built forms, the way it is anticipated it will be used and experienced and the heritage articulated through it, reflects and expresses the ambiguities of how the people of the city and the country view themselves and wish to be viewed by others. In the final analysis, as always, its use and heritage meaning must come down to the experience and perception of each individual consumer.

References


